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ABSTRACT

Thirty-nine at-risk college freshmen participated in an eight week non-credit seminar in the Fall of 1989. At the beginning of the seminar, students indicated that they enjoyed reading, did leisure reading, and felt that lack of vocabulary, slow reading rate, and inability to concentrate were their major reading problems. They also described their primary study strategies as underlining and rereading. The first step in the reading/learning paradigm was to incorporate into the students' thinking about reading and learning the concept of three levels of learning (rote recall; drawing conclusions, evaluating, making judgments; and problem solving). The students were then given a series of exercises intended to help them better understand the significance of the concept. Students in the one section of the seminar where the paradigm was used obtained the highest grade point average of all sections of the seminar. Students learned quickly that learning means more than just memorization. (Appendixes include a list of books read for leisure during the summer, a reading self-assessment, a learning style self-assessment, a general self-assessment, a description of the three levels of learning, and a list of the types of activities in each level of learning.) (RS)

The At-Risk College Student: A Paradigm for the Development of Critical Reading Skills

Paper Presented at the College Reading Association

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By

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The purpose of this paper is to present a paradigm that was used as part of a non-credit seminar for 39 students who were admitted to the university as part of a special admit program. These students entered the university with reading/learning skills that placed them in a high risk category. Each student admitted under the program had to participate in an eight week non-credit orientation seminar that focused on adjusting to the university and learning skills. The students with whom I worked were freshmen in the fall of 1989. I team taught the seminar with one other faculty member and our goal was to emphasize the learning skills since we believed that these students would not make it through four years and graduate if we could not bring their reading/learning skills up to a more acceptable level.

When these students entered the university they were, as are all new students, given an in-house reading exam which measures general reading ability and produces a percentile score. These students had an average percentile of 39 which is low, but within the range that suggests that the students can succeed. It should be noted that the percentiles range from zero to one hundred and research on the success of our students suggest that students can succeed and graduate if their reading score percentiles are above 25. With the average of this group at 39 it is easy to understand why these students were considered to be in a high risk category.

At the beginning of the class we assessed the students' general attitudes toward reading and evaluated their learning strategies. Overall the students indicated that they did enjoy reading, did leisure reading and felt that lack of vocabulary, slow reading rate and inability to concentrate were their major reading problems. They also described their primary study strategies as underlining and rereading.

The first step in the reading/learning paradigm was to incorporate into the students' thinking about reading and learning the concept of levels of learning. We demonstrated to the students that learning takes place at three levels. These include rote recall or detail learning. This is the arena of learning that freshmen find the easiest to handle. Memorizing facts is not difficult for students. However, they soon learn, as they begin to take exams, that university professors want to know if students can go beyond the recall of facts to the next level of learning which is inferential and which requires that students draw conclusions, make judgments, evaluate and analyze what they have learned. The third level is problem solving or application where students need to be able to apply what they have learned. Application would include synthesizing information and applying the data to a question where the answer needs to be thought out and not just a recall of a fact. Nowhere do these levels become more apparent than in the study of mathematics. Freshmen assume that their mathematics professors will only be testing their homework and are always devastated when their first major math exam problems do not look like their homework

problems. The students in the seminar learned this fact of university life very quickly.

Once the concept of levels of learning was introduced we gave the students a series of exercises intended to help them better understand the significance of the concept. The exercises focused on how questions tended to be written at the levels of learning. We had the students analyze questions that we provided and had them make up questions, based on the subjects they were taking. We had them critique the questions as to the level and what the students would have to do in order to learn the information required. The concept became operational very quickly as the students began to experience their first exams. As we moved through the exercises we examined learning strategies that would move the students from the passive act of reading, underlining and rereading to a learning stance that would incorporate group learning, questioning, notetaking, notecards and an overall active stance in their reading/learning activities.

At the end of the term we compared the average grade points of this section of the seminars with the students in the other sections where this paradigm was not applied. Although this section's grade point average was the highest of all the seminars(approximately 10), it was only a 1.9 where a 4.0 would be an A and 0.0 a failure. However, since these students entered the university with "high risk" status we felt that the learning paradigm was on the right track.

One student in the class, who said that she incorporated all the strategies that we discussed, has done outstandingly well and currently is in the College of Business with an overall GPA of 3.7.

The learning paradigm we emphasized required our students to internalize levels of learning so that they could understand that "learning" means more than just rote memory of information. The students learned to analyze the tests they took and to recognize that questions may ask for information that requires not only rote memory, but inference and problem solving. As we worked on the levels of learning we demonstrated study strategies that would enable the students to become involved in the learning process and to read more effectively. Group learning activities were modeled as well as effective notetaking and predicting for learning.

The paradigm was really an attempt to help students understand that reading/learning at the university is a skill that needs to be learned and once learned can lead the students to academic success.

Appendix A

Books Read for Leisure During the Summer

Native Son

Biography of Marilyn Monroe

Tom Sawyer

Dark Angel

Tina Turner Biography

The Garden of Eden

The Color Purple

CUJO

1984

Animal Farm

Hollywood Wives

Backward Shadow

Petals In the Wind

Appendix B

Reading Self-Assessment

CAAP Orientation Seminar

1. Do you enjoy reading?

2. Do you like to read for fun?

3. Can you list some books you read this summer?

4. Do you consider yourself a good reader?

5. Do you ever find some materials difficult to read; if you do what makes the material more difficult?

6. Do you read your texts before you go to class?

7. What strategies do you use to remember what you read?

Appendix C

How Do You Learn?

1. Do you read your material and feel that you know the information? Yes___ No___

2. If you can repeat information to a friend or another student, do you feel you know your material? Yes___ No___

3. Are you able to judge what the key or important points are in a lecture? Yes___ No___

4. Are you able to distinguish between key points and details? Yes___ No___

5. Do you know the difference between literal, inferential and applied learning? Yes___ No___

6. Are you able to determine what you need to know for your tests? Yes___ No___

7. Do you prepare for your math exams by redoing the homework? Yes___ No___

   Do you apply any other strategies? Yes___ No___

8. Are you able to remember what you have read? Yes___ No___

9. Do you keep a record of the key concepts in your text readings or lecture notes? Yes___ No___

10. Have you read all your class syllabi? Yes___ No___

Appendix D

Self-Assessment

1. Do you enjoy reading?

2. Do you enjoy reading as a leisure time activity?

3. Do you consider yourself a good reader?

4. Do you sometimes find it difficult to learn from texts?

5. Are some content texts more difficult for you to comprehend than others? If yes, which ones?

6. What strategies do you use to remember what you read?

7. How many words per minute do you think you can read?

8. If given a choice, what type of learning situation would you prefer?

9. Did you find that the study strategies you used in high school were adequate for university learning?

10. What would you recommend to a student who wanted to achieve a grade point above a 2.5?

Appendix E

Levels of Learning

We learn information at different levels of cognition or understanding.

These levels include:

1. Literal or rote: Learning at this level involves knowing the facts, the stated main idea, stated details, direct recall of information, paraphrasing.

2. Inference: Learning at this level involves inferring and/or supporting conjectures of main ideas, recognizing interrelations, understand significance, recognizing figurative language, going beyond stated information.

3. Applied or problem solving: Learning at this level requires application of literal and inferential materials, problem solving in math, science, looking analytically at information.

Appendix F

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Literal Comprehension Activities

1. Reading for main idea, stated details
2. Reading to find out what, where, when, who
3. Reading to note specific steps in an experiment, model
4. Reading and paraphrasing what you read.
5. Reading and noting exactly what is stated.
6. Test questions that call for recall of information that is explicitly stated.

Inferential Comprehension Activities

1. Reading and supporting conjectures of main ideas.
2. Reading and drawing conclusions based on what is read.
3. Reading and making judgments based on what is read.
4. Reading and discussing significance of what is read.
5. Reading, evaluating and analyzing what is read.
6. Rest questions that call for answers based not on explicit recall of information but judgment and evaluation.

Problem Solving Comprehension Activities

1. Reading that requires synthesis of ideas.
2. Reading that requires application of theoretical knowledge.
3. Reading that requires the ability to look at relationships and draw them together and apply to a problem.
4. Reading that requires the ability to identify relevant from irrelevant material.
5. Test questions that call for answers that can be determined by analyzing data and using the information to work through and solve a proble .